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ABSTRACT

This booklet is part of a series of seven booklets designed to introduce aspects of effective reading instruction that should be considered when teaching reading to students with disabilities. It focuses on essential skill building and teaching activities related to developing reading comprehension. The methods described of teaching reading to students with disabilities have been shown to be particularly effective. An introduction discusses general principles for teaching reading to students with disabilities and emphasizes the importance of individually designing a program based on a student's strengths and needs, parent involvement, and academic modifications. Information is organized into the following sections: what reading comprehension is, why it is important, what parents can do, what teachers can do, information for second language learners, and resources. Strategies include reading to a child everyday and asking what the different passages are about, asking children to make mental pictures during the reading, asking questions about the story or passage before and during reading, providing direct instruction in comprehension skills in the classroom, and using the Strategies Intervention Model for older students. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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PEER Literacy Resource Brief #6

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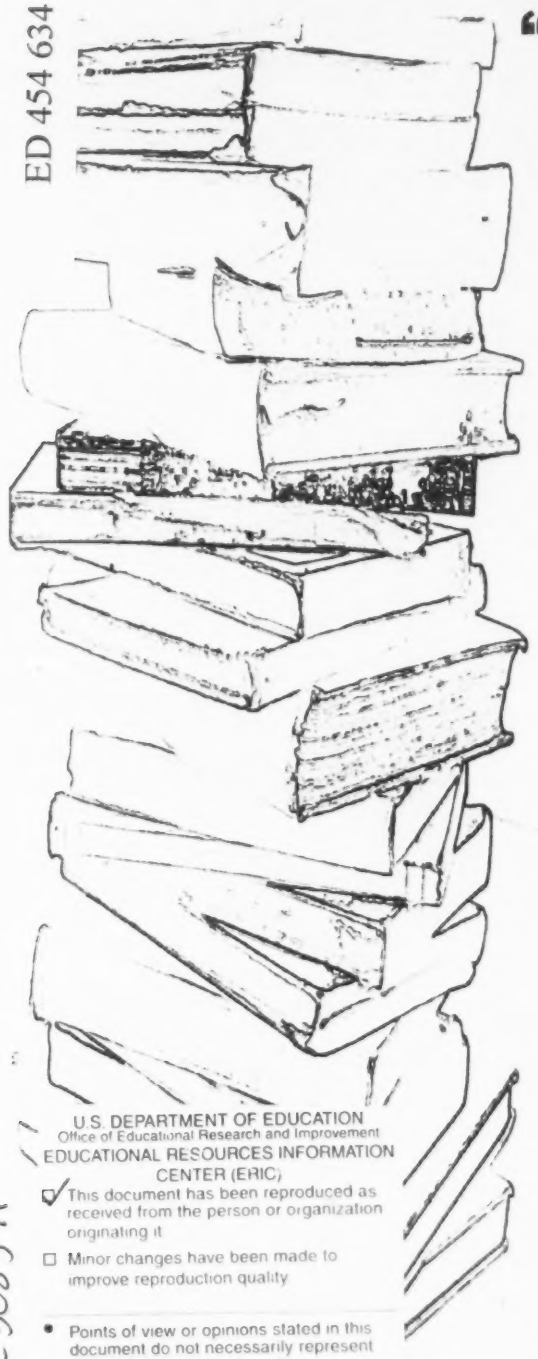

"Reading Comprehension"

from

Teaching Students with Disabilities to Read

by Carolyn A. Denton
Jan E. Hasbrouck
Texas A&M University

Prepared by
the PEER Project
(Parents Engaged in Education Reform)

PEER is a project of
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Parents Engaged in Education Reform (PEER) is a national technical assistance project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. PEER's purpose is to support parents of children with disabilities and their organizations to be informed, active participants in education reform efforts. In addition, to enhance opportunities for early literacy in reading for at-risk students, PEER is providing information and training to parent and community organizations in promising and best practices in literacy.

The Federation for Children with Special Needs is a nonprofit organization based on the philosophy of parents helping parents. Founded in 1974 as a coalition of twelve disability and parent organizations, today the Federation is an independent advocacy organization committed to quality education and health care for all, and to protecting the rights of all children. To this end, the Federation provides information, support, and assistance to parents of children with disabilities, their organizations, their professional partners, and their communities.

For more information about the PEER Project or the Federation for Children with Special Needs, please contact the Federation's Central Office at:

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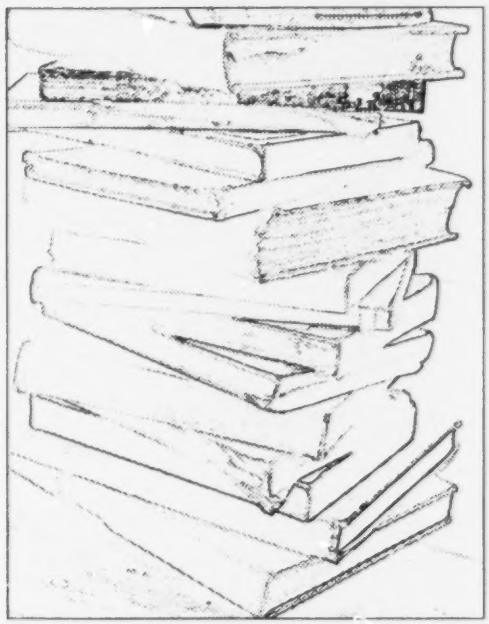
Reading Comprehension



Reading Comprehension is the sixth of a seven-part series of Resource Briefs that comprises *Teaching Students with Disabilities to Read: A PEER Resource Booklet.* Titles of Resource Briefs in this series of PEER Literacy Resource Briefs include:

Brief #1: Phonological Awareness

Brief #2: Systematic Phonics Instruction

Brief #3: Word Identification

Brief #4: Supported Passage Reading

Brief #5: Fluent Reading

Brief #6: Reading Comprehension

Brief #7: Early Intervention in Reading

Reading Comprehension is organized into these sections:

- General principles to keep in mind
- What is reading comprehension and why is it important?
- What can parents do?
- What can teachers do?
- Note for second-language learners
- Conclusion
- Resources
- References

General principles to keep in mind

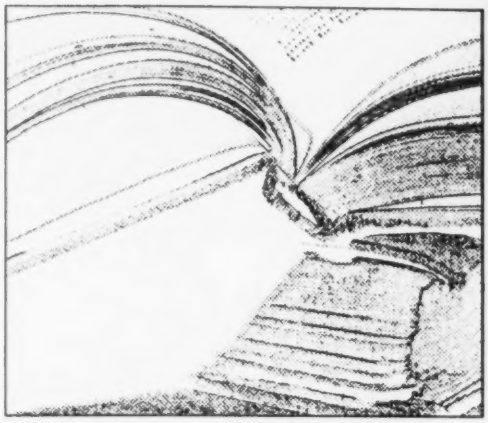
Reading is very important for success in our society, yet as many as one in five students has difficulty learning to read. Most students with learning disabilities, and many students with other types of disabilities, have problems in the areas of reading, writing, and spelling. This **Literacy Resource Brief** introduces parents and teachers to essential skill-building and teaching activities related to developing a child's phonological awareness. Methods of teaching reading to students with disabilities described here have been shown to be particularly effective. Some of these methods are used in regular education classrooms for students who are just learning to read (Kindergarten through Grade 2), but they are still relevant and useful for students with disabilities of any age who have not learned to read well. Instructional materials should be selected with an eye toward age appropriateness.

The following key issues in reading instruction for students with disabilities are important regardless of the age or ability level of a student.

- Students with all types of disabilities have the *right* to quality reading instruction, whether they are in elementary, middle, or high school. Parents have the *right* to insist that the school provide instruction designed to help their children with disabilities improve their reading skills. These issues should be addressed in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).

- Reading programs for students with disabilities should be individually designed based on a student's strengths and needs. Parents and teachers should not make judgments about a student's ability to learn, or about the best way to teach him or her, based solely on a student's disabling condition or label. Every individual student's abilities, needs, and life situation must be carefully evaluated and considered in the IEP in order to design the best reading program for that student.

- Many students with disabilities may need modifications (changes) in the way they receive instruction, and in the way they fulfill class requirements in order to succeed in areas such as science, social studies, and language arts. These modifications are very important, but *they should not take the place of instruction* designed to help students with disabilities improve their reading skills.



Students with all types of disabilities have the *right* to quality reading instruction, whether they are in elementary, middle, or high school.

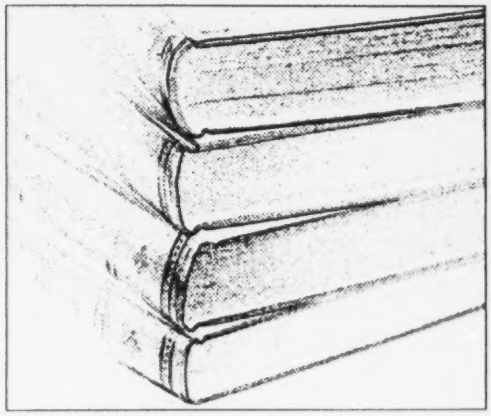
- Parents should, first and always, communicate with their child's teacher(s). Parents can simply ask their child's teacher(s) what can be done to help the child at home. Parents should also recognize themselves and be recognized as important sources of information about their child's interests, abilities, and learning styles. Coordination of school and home efforts is one of the best ways to help a student succeed. Strategies to ensure communication and coordination between school and home can be addressed in the student's IEP.

- The reading material used in reading instruction has to be "not too hard, not too easy," but at the right level for a student. Actual reading of real stories or other material should be part of a student's reading program.

- In the past, some people believed that certain methods of teaching reading were best for students with certain disabilities: that some methods were best for students with brain injury, that others were better for students with learning disabilities, and that still other methods were best for students with mental retardation. This is not the case. The success of a method of teaching reading depends on the content of the program, the way it is taught, the intensity of the instruction (how often and how actively it is taught), and the needs and strengths of the individual student.

- Although different methods of teaching reading may work equally well with students having various disabilities, students benefit when instruction is systematic and structured. Reading skills should be introduced in careful order, and students must be given a great deal of practice and repetition in each skill, so that they master each skill before new ones are introduced.

- **Note for second language learners:** Students who come to school unable to speak English should first be taught



to read in their *native language*. Later, as they gain proficiency in spoken English, they should be taught to extend these skills to reading in English. This practice, however, is not possible in all school situations. Instructional materials may not be available in the child's native language, or there may not be a teacher who can speak and read in the child's native language. If students cannot speak English, and they cannot be taught to read in their native language, they should be given time to develop their proficiency in spoken English before they begin reading instruction. They need to learn English speech sounds and vocabulary. English reading instruction should begin *after* the student can speak English well enough to benefit from instruction.

Reference

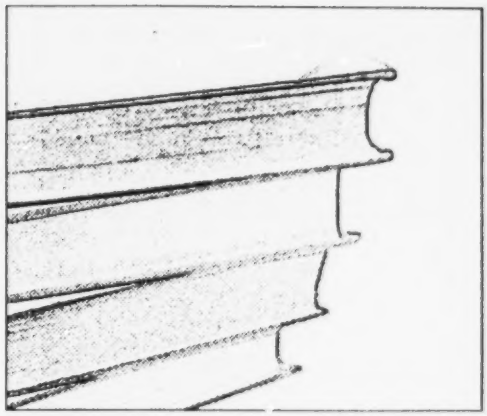
Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.) (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children.* Washington D.C.: National Academy Press.

What is reading comprehension and why is it important?

Reading comprehension means understanding and remembering what is read. It is the purpose of reading. We read to find out what the author of a book, story, or article is telling us. Whether we are reading a comic book, a good novel, a television schedule, a newspaper, or a job application, we read to understand what the words on the paper mean. If students with disabilities cannot comprehend or understand and remember what they are reading, they will not be able to get information they need from books or enjoy good stories.

Reading comprehension is closely linked to listening comprehension, a person's ability to understand and remember what they hear. A student who has problems producing and understanding spoken language might also have problems understanding written language. Students with cognitive impairments (difficulties with thinking and reasoning) often can be expected to have serious problems understanding what they read or what is read to them.

There are several different kinds of comprehension. The simplest is literal comprehension. That means simply remembering what is read and being able to repeat it. If you read "John went to Texas," and the teacher asked, "Where did John go?", you would use literal comprehension to answer "Texas."



Reading comprehension means understanding and remembering what is read. It is the purpose of reading. We read to find out what the author of a book, story, or article is telling us.

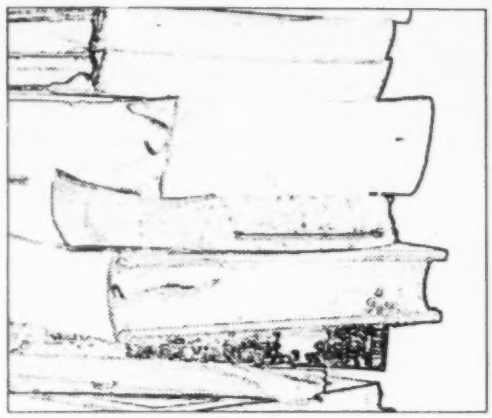
Other comprehension skills include sequencing, which means putting events in order, and summarizing, which means telling the main ideas of a passage. Comprehension also includes inference, which means using clues in the passage to figure out answers to questions. The answers to inference questions are not directly stated in the passage (as in the "John" example above). Students must think, reason, and draw conclusions about what is read.

NOTE: The Research Briefs on **Systematic Phonics Instruction (# 2)** and **Word Identification (# 3)** discuss the importance of students' being able to quickly recognize and read words. **Fluent Reading (#5)** stresses that students who read more quickly and smoothly are more likely to understand and remember what they read. Many students have problems with reading comprehension *because* they cannot figure out words quickly enough. Please see the Research Briefs on **Systematic Phonics Instruction, Word Identification,** and **Fluent Reading** for suggestions about helping students improve their reading comprehension. Also, see **Early Intervention in Reading (# 7)** for information about language development programs which may help students who have problems expressing themselves in or understanding spoken language.

What can parents do?

Some students have problems remembering and understanding what they read even when reading the words is easy, or when someone else reads to them. The following list describes some strategies parents can use to help:

- Read to your child every day, for at least 20-30 minutes. Before reading, talk with your child about the subject of the story or passage you are going to read. Have your child predict what the passage will be about, tell what they already know about the topic, and/or tell things they would like to find out from the reading. Then read one or two paragraphs. Stop and ask what the paragraphs were about or talk about them together. It may help to ask specific questions about the paragraphs you read. If discussing what was read is difficult for your child, here are some things you can try:



  1) Choose a simpler story or passage, or one that deals with a subject your child knows a lot about. For example, if your child loves baseball and knows a lot about the game, find a story or passage about baseball.
  2) Read less before you stop and ask your child to tell about the passage. Read two sentences instead of two paragraphs.

- Use these same activities, only have your child read to you this time (for at least 20-30 minutes each day). Be sure that the passage is not too difficult. See **Fluent Reading (# 5)** for instructions on how to judge if a passage is on the right level, or use your own judgment.

Students who struggle a great deal to read the words in the passage will probably not be able to understand and remember what they read.

- One trick to help children remember what was read to them or what they read themselves is to ask them to make mental pictures during the reading. They can imagine everything that is happening in the story or passage, just as though they are seeing it on television.

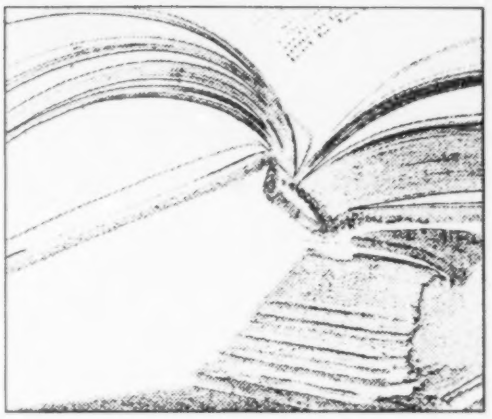
- Another helpful exercise is to have children ask questions about the story or passage before reading (what they want to find out) and during reading, stopping every paragraph or so to talk about answers they have found to earlier questions and to ask more questions.

- After reading the entire story or passage, have your child tell in one or two sentences the most important main ideas of the reading. They can also tell the most interesting things they learned from the reading and/or their favorite parts of a story.

What can teachers do?

Teachers can do all of the things described above for parents. They can also include the following approaches in their reading instruction:

- **Direct Instruction in Comprehension Skills.** Several Direct Instruction programs teach comprehension skills in a systematic and organized way. This type of approach is especially important for students with disabilities who have reading difficulties. For example, SRA's Corrective Reading Program has components which are specifically designed for students in grades 4-8 who have difficulty with comprehension. The program's authors suggest that the program is appropriate for students who speak and understand English, and who have learning, emotional, or perceptual disabilities or other disabilities with reading comprehension learning needs.



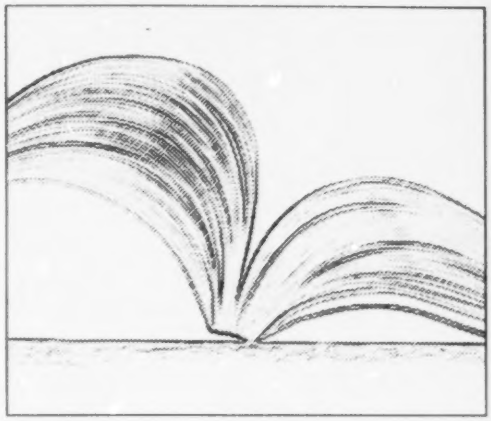
Reading comprehension is closely linked to listening comprehension, a person's ability to understand and remember what they hear.

The program begins with instruction in basic thinking and language comprehension skills and progresses through more advanced comprehension and vocabulary skills.

- **Comprehension Strategy Instruction.** Especially for students in middle school, high school, and college, instruction and training in the use of comprehension strategies has been shown to be effective in increasing reading comprehension. A strategy is a planned action that students take when they encounter a problem. Strategy instruction emphasizes teaching students how to learn, including how to approach and work through problems. Some examples of effective comprehension strategies include:

  - ***summarizing strategies*** – *step-by-step procedures for writing effective summaries of what is read,*
  - ***mental imagery strategies*** – *imagining, or making mental pictures of what is read,*
  - ***questioning strategies*** – *asking a variety of questions about what they are reading, and learning how to locate answers to questions,*
  - ***reciprocal teaching strategies*** – *students studying and learning from text, and*
  - ***story grammar strategies*** – *anticipating common parts of a story, such as characters, problem, and solution.*

The *Strategies Intervention Model* from the University of Kansas (see



Resources) is a well-researched method of strategy instruction. Trainers who have attended special sessions at the University of Kansas contract with school districts to provide training to teachers.

- **Modeling Mental Processes.** An approach closely related to strategy instruction (and included in most strategy instruction) is modeling mental processes. The teacher "thinks out loud" to show students effective mental processes which can be used during reading. For example, the teacher may say, "I want to show you what I think about when I come to a word I don't know," or "When I read I ask myself whether what I am reading is making sense. Let me show you what I might be thinking about as I am reading this story."

- **Academic Intervention Approach.** Teachers can help students understand subject areas (like science or social

studies) by giving them extra organizational tools. Some excellent tools for this purpose are described in a section of the book *Interventions: Collaborative Planning for Students At Risk*, listed in the **Resources** section. For example, a graphic organizer is a chart or diagram of the important concepts in a lesson or reading passage. On the chart are blank spaces for the student to fill in during or after reading. Another academic intervention often useful for students with disabilities is preteaching important vocabulary words before a lesson or reading assignment is given. Teachers can also highlight students' textbooks to help the students identify the most important information in the passage. Highlighter tape can be used and then removed without damage to books.

Note for second language learners

Students who have a limited understanding of English can be expected to have difficulty understanding passages written in English. Comprehension instruction should begin in these students' native language. Adults should read to the students in their native languages and talk about what is being read, as described in **What can parents do?** It is essential to prepare students with limited English proficiency for reading in English. Parents and teachers should introduce the story or passage by talking about what the reading will be about and by teaching any vocabulary words that could present problems for the reader.

Instruction in some strategies has increased reading comprehension among second-language learners (especially Spanish-speaking students) on the secondary level. Less successful bilingual Spanish readers have been taught to use "tricks" that more successful readers use. Successful bilingual readers understand the ways that reading and writing in their two languages are alike. Less successful readers see their two languages as separate and unrelated. For example, when more successful Spanish bilingual readers come to an English word they do not know, they may think of a similar Spanish word to help them figure out the English word. When they read in English, they often *think about* what they are reading in both Spanish and English.

Spanish-speaking bilingual readers have been taught to successfully use strategies like those described above in **What can teachers do?** during English reading. When they are taught to ask questions while reading, to think about the meanings of unknown words, use what they know to understand difficult parts, and make visual pictures in their minds, they may become more motivated to read in English and read more successfully.

Conclusion

With proper instruction and support, many more students than previously thought capable of reading can learn to read. Reading can open the door to success, enabling students to live fuller, more independent lives and to succeed in a variety of careers. This **PEER**

Literacy Resource Brief has outlined areas of critical concern in reading education for students with disabilities. When parents and teachers have access to the information they need, they are better equipped to make decisions about students' educational programs.

Resources

NOTE: These resources may be helpful to teachers and parents. They are listed here merely as options. The authors of this paper do not recommend any particular program, materials, or test.

Direct Instruction Materials

Corrective Reading, by Engelmann, Haddox, Hanner, & Osborn, published by SRA, 220 East Danieldale Rd., DeSoto, TX 75115-2490, (800) 843-8855.

Reading Mastery, by Engelmann & Bruner, published by SRA, 220 East Danieldale Rd., DeSoto, TX 75115-2490, (800) 843-8855.

Strategy Instruction Materials and Tutoring

Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes. (800)233-1819. http://www.lblp.com.

Strategies Intervention Model, training and information available from the University of Kansas, Center for Research on Learning, 3061 Dole Center, Lawrence, KS 66045.

Academic Intervention Materials

Interventions: Collaborative Planning for Students At Risk, by Sprick, Sprick, & Garrison, Published by Sopris West, 1140 Boston Ave., Longmont, CO, 80501, (303) 651-2829.

Teaching Strategies, Inc., P.O. Box 50550, Eugene, OR 97405, (800) 323-8819. (Workshops, publications, and inservice on academic and behavioral interventions.)

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